

Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves: A Romantic Fantasy in the Sand (Part 2)

Colorful pageant turned a tidy profit for Universal.

by Richard J. Schmidt

In Part I (AC October '94), the writer examined the operatic and melodramatic underpinnings of the Ali Baba style. With these elements in place, all director Arthur Lubin needed was the right troupe of actors.

The cast included Turhan Bey, who assumed the role of Jamiel after Sabu, for whom the role was written, was drafted for war service; Andy Devine, Fortunio Bonanova, Frank Puglia, and, as the young Ali, Scotty Beckett, who two years before had played the young Jon Hall in the 1941 Paramount effort *Aloma of the South Seas*. Yvette Duguay,

who plays the young princess Amara, also appeared in *Aloma* as the young Dorothy Lamour. Montez, Bey, and Andy Devine were all "contract talent," meaning that they would receive their standard weekly paycheck for *Ali Baba*. According to the studio budget breakdown, contract talent cost Universal \$43,233.38. The other actors, including Hall, Puglia, Kurt Katch, Bonanova, and Moroni Olsen, were "outside talent" on the budget summary, and were paid by the picture. They all would have come under the provisions of the Screen Actors Guild minimum contract, which guaranteed at



Having brought his daughter Amara (Maria Montez) from Basra, Cassim, Grand Vizier to the Khan, presents her to the Khan, hoping that he will take the girl as his wife, thus cementing Cassim's security in the court.

Near right:
Director Arthur
Lubin kneels to
direct a scene
and still towers
over Angelo
Rossitto, who
plays a court-
jester-like
character. The
Khan is played
by Kurt Katch.
Below right:
Princess Amara
languishes in
the harem of the
Mongol Khan.



least one week's work and payment every Wednesday. Outside talent cost the studio \$41,821.43.

Jon Hall, at age 30, was a well-known Hollywood leading man. Though six years past his best film, *The Hurricane*, he appeared in numerous action-adventure pictures, including the Universal film *Eagle Squadron*. He began his film career in 1935 under his own name, Charles Locher, and freelanced at Paramount and other studios before hitting it big in 1937. At the time of his death from a self-inflicted gunshot wound in 1979, he marketed his own anamorphic camera lenses.

Maria Montez (1920-1951) spent almost her entire American film career at Universal. Her career began in 1941 with bit roles in features such as *The Invisible Woman*, but she earned star status with her role as Scheherazade in *Arabian Nights*. When her career faded, she turned to European productions; director Lubin states that she was always prone to being overweight and that this contributed to her loss of popularity. She died of a heart attack at 31.

Also in the cast was Fred Cavens — long a fixture at Warner Bros., where he had previously taught fencing routines to Errol Flynn and Basil Rathbone in *The Adventures of Robin Hood* and to Flynn and Henry Daniell in *The Sea Hawk*. Here, cast as one of the 40 thieves, he was expected to design and work out fight choreography. In his previous films, Cavens utilized broad swords, sabers, and foils. In *Ali Baba* he would be required to use the curved and heavy Arabian scimitars while still maintaining the quickness and excitement characteristic of the Warner duels.

Involved with choreography of a different

kind were dance directors Lester Horton and Paul O'Scard. Horton, a Los Angeles dancer and teacher, had a reputation for balletic athleticism in his work, and had contributed to the ballet sequences in *Phantom* three months before. O'Scard had previously done dance direction for another Arabian-themed film, *The Road to Morocco*, at Paramount. On *Ali Baba*, the two were responsible for arranging the dance of the mongol warriors which climaxed the picture and ended with the plunging of swords into 40 jars. The dance was photographed with much care, reflecting the meticulous approach of director of photography, George Robinson, ASC. The camera moves fluidly from close-up to high-angled top shots, dollying back and forth and building a sense of excitement with movement and changing image size. The script describes the action: "FULL SHOT — THE ENTRANCE DOORS as twin lines of seminude Mongol soldiers whirl out in a fantastic, bloodcurdling sword dance. They swing the great scimitars over their heads and leap about to the dissonant, cruel strains of music."

The cruel music, incidentally, was the work of Edward Ward. Ward (d. 1971) had started directing film music at least as early as 1929, and did 12



pictures for Universal between 1943 and 1945. He also wrote *Ali Baba's* rousing bandit song, "Forty and One For All" (along with lyricist J.K. Brennan), and reprised it frequently for thematic emphasis. In keeping with operetta requirements, music is used heavily in *Ali Baba*, and there is hardly a frame of the film that is not scored.

The day before principal shooting began, a second unit, under the direction of Ray Taylor, took the 115-mile trek out to the Mojave desert to begin four days of action scenes at Red Rock Canyon. A startlingly beautiful movie "ranch," the Canyon was owned at the time by the Rudolph Hagen family, which rented the location to filmmakers for a use-fee.

This location work, shot by Harry Hallenberger, ASC, somewhat mirrors the location-



Jon Hall gets set for a big scene, his entry into Bagdad leading a mule train carrying 40 jars of "precious oils" to the Mongol Kahn. An assistant holds up the slate to key the scene as Mongols and citizens of Bagdad await their cues.

realism achieved in the Yuma-photographed desert scenes in *Arabian Nights*. The footage, which was shot with the huge rented Technicolor cameras (\$80 per day), lifts the film considerably beyond studio limits, adding much excitement and action. Taylor (1888-1952) was a specialist in serials and low-budget Westerns, doing second-unit work on many A-films and directing first units in B-films up through 1949. About two-and-a-half minutes of his footage (maybe 20 setups) remain in the release print and include various ride-throughs, the chase scene between Andy Devine and the two guards (shot partly in Hagen Canyon), short scenes with Scotty Beckett and Maria Montez doubles, and the astonishing Ride of the Forty Thieves which begins before the Red Cliff's Preserve, a 285-foot blaze of sedimentary rock visible today off of State Highway 14. Universal's contract wrangler, Jimmy Phillips, worked with Taylor (and later Arthur Lubin) in dramatizing the action.

In reality, nearly all of these scenes were simply more Western footage (the thieves even hold their reins Western-style) dressed up to suggest the Middle East, but always in the form a Western audience could understand — and Taylor could deliver expertly. (Arthur Lubin, incidentally, does not

remember consulting with Taylor on anything to be shot.) The 41 riders in the "Ride" scenes were each paid \$11 a day, and certainly earned it during the summer in the heat of the Mojave; this compares to the \$5.50 a day that the crowd extras earned back at Universal City.

Meanwhile, back at the Universal lot in North Hollywood, Maria Montez was becoming a problem. The Queen of Technicolor had strong opinions about how she was to be handled. According to Arthur Lubin, "Once in a while Maria got very temperamental. I remember once she was very late coming onto the set. She said that her wig wasn't ready and that her clothes weren't ready. I said, 'Maria, that's terrible; you're holding me up.' She looked at me and said, 'You, Arthur, are full of shit.' She tore her wig off and ran into the producer's office. I sent my assistant to see if he could get her back. And he came back laughing. He said 'You won't believe what the producer said: Cheer up Maria, all directors are full of shit.'"

Dialogue director Stacy Keach Sr. remembers, "Maria and Arthur fought and she began to take her direction from me. She wasn't talking to Arthur, so I acted as an intermediary between them. I had no problem with her. I'd talk to Arthur, then

relay it to Maria. It became part of my job."

Keach, father of the performer who has played Mike Hammer on television, was an actor himself, in addition to being a drama teacher and dialogue coach. The previous year he had been part of the Hitchcock company on the making of *Shadow of a Doubt*. He worked well with Arthur Lubin. "Arthur was a talented man," he says. "Fair, and liked by just about everyone."

Money was spent to create a lush and colorful pageant. While filming the "entrance into Baghdad" sequence on July 27, a huge menagerie of animals was rented for display on the backlot set: 30 horses (palominos, blacks, mongols, Arabians, etc.), 6 water buffaloes, 11 monkeys, 20 mules, 6 brahma bulls, 6 camels, 4 elephants, 4 macaws, 4 cockatoos, and 3 falcons.

Shooting wrapped on August 31, 1943, 13 days over schedule and \$79,371.49 over direct cost as budgeted. The delays were attributable in part to Montez. Keach worked with her extensively on dramatic inflection and nuance, but Montez was not a quick study, and had difficulty mastering complicated dialogue. She leaned on Keach. Hartmann seemed aware of Montez's difficulty with her line delivery and acting skill and compensated in his writing. A review of the shooting script reveals that Princess Amara (Montez) nearly always had shorter lines than anyone she played off of, and this carried forward to the film itself. Certainly in her scenes with Hall, it is he, the second-billed (and lesser-paid) actor, who speaks the most words. Hall's lines include such gems as "By the beard of the Prophet — if I had a thousand pieces of gold I should offer it all for such a slave girl as you."

Of Montez, Lubin says simply, "She was not a good actress, but she was very photogenic."

Montez's character underwent a name change sometime between the writing of Hartmann's May draft and the shooting in June. She went from "Zura" in all 113 pages of the script to "Amara" in the film. Technical advisor Jamiel Hasson argued that Zura is not an Arab name, though Amara is.

The uncut footage was turned over to Russell Schoengarth, with \$8,000 allotted for editing of the work print, cutting of the negative, and daily projection expenses. Sometime during this process, he excised the wraparound story that was part of Hartmann's original draft. Director Lubin thinks this was done to save time. The wraparound here was similar to the storyteller sequences in both *Arabian Nights* and *The Jungle Book* (1942), and so was becoming a convention of the color fantasy film. The sequence from *Ali Baba* began in the Baghdad bazaar, with a flute-playing fakir setting the background of the story.

After the sequence was trimmed, a superimposed title card was inserted at the conclusion of the opening credits to summarize the cut scene:

"Baghdad — In the Days of the Mongol Invasions." The film then faded in on Scene #6 with the plundering of Baghdad and the introduction of our villain, the Hulagu Khan. The briefer and closing frame scenes were also omitted.

Postproduction included the color-correction done by the Technicolor lab itself. This was vital because the "dailies" seen each morning by the director, photographer, and producers had been printed only in black & white. The cost of printing off of the three-strip negatives, of registering and correcting them, was far too prohibitive to be done daily. The only color that Robinson saw prior to the rough cut had been a color frame or strip from each scene provided by the Technicolor people.

Additionally, John Fulton, ASC and his crew completed their visual effects work and Edward Ward added his score. The inserts photographed for the Ride of the Forty Thieves and cut into the Red Rock Canyon footage seem to have been hastily assembled. Jon Hall, Andy Devine, and Fortunio Bonanova were placed on mechanical horses before a process screen with Red Rock footage projected behind them. Clearly Hall does not know the lyric he is singing, and Devine and Bonanova (himself an operatic baritone who was seen in *Phantom*), though better, are still tentative and less robust than what the scene seems to call for. Some dramatic scenes were dubbed as well. Stacy Keach remembers that one of the actors recorded poorly because of a foreign accent. Despite attempts to correct the problem during shooting, Keach himself had to dub the actor's entire part in postproduction, though the actor himself was unaware of the change.

With this completed, Technicolor produced the final imbibition release prints.

The film's final price tag, which included studio overhead and cost overruns, amounted to \$791,714.36, or \$99,214.36 over budget. Thus, *Ali Baba* was not an inexpensive picture when most Universal films were, according to director Lubin, produced for under \$250,000 (*The Phantom of the Opera*, released in August of 1943, came in at a reported \$1,750,000). But "Maria's pictures," Lubin said, "made money. She was the money end, not Jon Hall."

Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves was released on January 14, 1944. In a pre-release review, *Variety* (1/7/44) called it "a winner." And though other reviews were not quite as glowing, Universal Pictures clearly had another first-run hit on their hands. The picture's success contributed to Universal's \$3.4 million after-tax profit for the year, the studio's second-best margin of the previous 12 years. (Paramount Pictures produced 1944's largest film studio profit of \$14.7 million, but they also won 10 Academy Awards that year compared to Universal's one — and that sole award was a class III technical award.)



Ali (Jon Hall) stands before the throne of Hulagu Khan with other gift-bearing merchants and princes, while Mongol swordsman (Paul Oskar Ballet) do a scimitar dance. In the background are the Ali's gift to the Khan, oil jars in which the Khan hopes to trap Ali's men.

So Maria Montez and Jon Hall, their best film together now behind them, would soon begin the next picture in their money-making series, *Cobra Woman*.

Credits

A Universal Pictures production. Produced by Paul Malvern; executive producer Jack J. Gross; directed by Arthur Lubin; original screenplay by Edmund L. Hartmann based on *A Thousand and One Nights*; director of photography, George Robinson, ASC; associate, W. Howard Greene, ASC; art director, John B. Goodman; associate art director, Richard H. Reidel; set decorators, R.A. Gausman, Ira S. Webb; Technicolor staff, Natalie Kalmus, William Fritzsche; musical score, Edward Ward; lyrics, J. K. Brennan; sound direction, Bernard B. Brown; sound technician, Robert Pritchard; makeup, Jack P. Pierce; costumes, Vera West; film editor, Russell Schoengarth; special photography, John P. Fulton, ASC; dance directors, Paul Oskar, Lester Horton; script clerk, Evelyn Bostock; first assistant director, Charles Gould; second assistant director, Jud Cox; dialogue director, Stacy Keach; technical advisor, Jamiel Hasson; fencing master, Fred Cavens; wrangler, Jimmy Phillips; prop man, Blackie Rosenkrantz; unit managers, Morrie Weiner, Edward Dodds; second-unit director, Ray Taylor; second-unit cinematography, Harry Hallenberger, ASC; second-unit assistant directors, Fred Frank, Ralph Slosser; second-unit script clerk, Joe Kenny; Western Electric recording; running time 87 minutes; released January 14, 1944.

Princess Amara, Maria Montez; Ali Baba, Jon Hall; Jamiel, Turhan Bey; Abdullah, Andy Devine; Hulagu Khan, Kurt

Katch; Prince Cassim, Frank Puglia; Baba, Fortunio Bonanova; Caliph, Moroni Olson; Nalu, Ramsay Ames; Fat thief, Chris-Pin Martin; Young Ali, Scotty Beckett; Young Amara, Yvette Duguay; Mongol captain, Noel Cravat; Little thief, Jimmy Conlon; Mahmoud, Harry Cording; Thieves, David Heywood, Hans Herbert, Ethan Laidlaw, Dick Dickinson, Joey Ray, Pedro Regas, Fred Cavens, John Calvert; Dancers (Paul Oskar Ballet), Eric Braunsteiner, Jerome Andrews, Alex Goudovitch, Ed Brown, George Martin, Dick D'Arcy; Arab major-domo, Rex Evans; Nursemaid, Belle Mitchell; Mongol guard, Harry Woods; Tailor, Alphonse Berg; Barber, Charles Wagenheim; Arab giant, Wee Willie Davis; Guard, Norman Willis; Mongol captain, Robert Barron; Mongol guard, Dick Alexander; Persian prince, James Khan; Guards, Pierce Lyden, Don McGill; Mongol guard, Art Miles; High priest, Theodore Tabor Patay; Arab dwarf, Angelo Rossetto; Tama, Prince of Cawnpore, Stewart East; Palace guard, Carl Sepulveda; Handmaidens, Margaret Zane, Thelma Haven, Karen Knight, Geraldine Fisette; Princess Kanza Omar, Alma Pappas; Paulita Arvizu, Betty Lorraine.

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